Augusta Read Thomas: Terpsichore's Box of Dreams

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By **Kate Wakeling**

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Terpsichore’s Box of Dreams*; Carnival for Bassoon and Wind Ensemble; Star Box; Dance Mobile etc

*Grossman Ensemble/Tim Weiss et al

Nimbus NI 6445 69:26 mins

For composer Augusta Read Thomas, the arrival of a new musical idea often feels ‘like a spark or lightning bolt – like lighting a match – and suddenly, poof, there’s an illumination, an inspiration, if you will.’ Thomas’s music itself fizzes with this same vivid sense of energy; her complex, imaginative scores verily zing with life and colour, while readily charting profound emotional depths. As such, Thomas is well-established as one of America’s most accomplished and inventive contemporary composers.

This outstanding release from Nimbus forms part of a long-running survey of Thomas’s work spanning some 30 years of music, but this album focuses on relatively recent work (the earliest piece included dates from 2018). The selection nonetheless showcases the breadth of her composition, both in its varied sonorities and creative subject matter.

Terpsichore’s Box of Dreams (2023) for chamber ensemble is the album’s most substantial work. Devised as a sequence of seven dances, the piece explores the sensibilities of the muse Terpsichore, ‘goddess of dance and delight’, and imagines her ‘box of dreams’, out of which tumble a ‘kaleidoscopic profusion [of] ideas and colours’. It is a remarkable score: mercurial in its wit and beauty with moments of shimmering

poignancy (the third dance also receives this top-notch title: 'Pointillistic Groove Flutter Among many highlights, *Carnival* (2022) also stands out, framed here as a concerto for bassoon 'locking horns' with a wind ensemble. Soloist Nadina Mackie Jackson gives an especially rollicking performance and her strident solo line is met with stinging retorts from SUNY Fredonia Wind Ensemble (conducted with flair by Paula Holcomb) in this exhilaratingly spiky work.

Dance Mobile (2021) for chamber orchestra also lands with particular power. The work was composed to commemorate Oliver Knussen, one of Thomas's composition teachers and a longstanding friend, and conveys more of a sense of celebration than memorial. Combining a marvellous agility and a certain steely beauty, the work is formed from three interconnected dances, which Thomas conceived of 'as if [each] hanging on an Alexander Calder-like mobile, suspended so as to turn freely in the air'.

Thomas's smaller-scale works are no less delightful. *Laetitia's Caprice* (2023) is a graceful 'fanfare' for solo soprano saxophone (exquisitely performed by Phil Pierick) while *Bebop Riddle II* (2022) showcases Thomas's longstanding devotion to jazz in a wonderfully tricksy musical conversation for piano and cello (marked *pizzicato* throughout). Two pieces for percussion quartet complete the selection. *Con Moto* (2018) has the feel of an intricate musical jigsaw, the four musical lines interlocking with arresting precision, while the deft and glimmering *Star Box* (2020) is another affectingly unsentimental musical memorial, this time written for composer Jacob Druckman, who taught Thomas at Yale in the 1980s.

Beautifully performed and recorded, the whole selection has the feeling of a musical treasure trove, resplendent in its sense of vitality, beauty and imaginative possibility. *Kate Wakeling*

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